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THE GREAT MODERN VERSIONS OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

PROFESSOR HENRY THATCHER FOWLER, PH.D.
Brown University, Providence, R.I.

With the final dissolution of the Long Parliament in 1660, the efforts that were being made within that body for a new revision of the English Bible came to an abrupt end. Already, by its inherent merits, the King James Version had superseded its older rivals and now it was to exercise, for two centuries, unquestioned dominance among English-speaking peoples.

Neither the Restoration Period nor the eighteenth century was notable for advance in the biblical scholarship of England. In the great discoveries of the nineteenth century, that were destined to put the study of the Bible upon an entirely new plane, British scholars had a distinguished rôle, it is true; yet even in this century historical criticism of the Bible made its way much less rapidly in England than upon the Continent. In textual criticism, on the other hand, the English took a position that placed them in the very van during the second half of the nineteenth century.

While the "lower" or textual criticism has attracted less popular attention than the new historical study of the Bible, its advances in the field of New Testament study have been no less decisive. The "Received Text" of the New Testament, generally followed down to the middle of the nineteenth century, was based upon the examination of manuscripts few in number and late in date, roughly, of the tenth to the twelfth centuries. In the case of many of the greatest writers of ancient Greece, the modern world is dependent upon manuscripts as late as these, but, by the middle of the nineteenth century, it had become widely recognized that it was no longer necessary to use a Greek Testament subject to the errors incident to so many years of copying. The materials were available, the science of evidence as applied to their use was developing,

which would make possible a text six hundred years nearer the original than that upon which the translators of 1611 had been forced to base their work. In 1858, Dean Trench of Westminster published a small volume upon *Bible Revision*. He wrote: "The question 'Shall we, or shall we not, have a new revision of the Authorized Version?' is one which is presenting itself more and more familiarly to the minds of men." Indications of awakening interest came from all sides. The matter had been broached by a dissenter in Parliament and by a regius professor in Convocation. The general reviews had taken up the subject; even the newspapers had given much space to it. A revision every fifty years had been suggested; while a writer in the *Edinburgh Review* had even proposed a permanent commission which should be "always altering, always embodying in a new and improved edition the latest allowed results of biblical criticism." The latter plan seemed alarming to the dean, if there were the slightest chance of its adoption, yet he did favor a moderate, rather tentative, and slow revision as highly desirable.

In 1865 the American Bible Union issued a complete revised English New Testament, professedly based upon the oldest versions and the most ancient manuscripts available. In this work, two important steps are noticeable: the biblical verse division which had prevailed for three centuries was abandoned for a logical paragraph division and all Old Testament quotations "which appear as poetry in the original" were printed in the stichometric form. At about the same time, five English clergymen collaborated in the publication of a revised version of a part of the New Testament and, in 1869, one of them, Dean Alford, made use of this joint work in his complete revised New Testament. Only a few months before this last event, Mr. Westcott (later Bishop Westcott) thought it useless, in his *History of the English Bible*, to discuss revision, since "revision of the original texts must precede the revision of the translation and the time for this, even in the New Testament, has not yet fully come."

The time had come, however, when the demand could no longer be stayed; only fifteen months later, Bishop Wilberforce presented a resolution in the Convocation of Canterbury that a committee

be appointed to report on the desirableness of a revision of the New Testament; the Old Testament was added by amendment, and the resolution, seconded by Bishop Ellicott, was adopted.

The matter was advanced with great zeal, but with more of deliberation than in the days of King James. When a single version had held sway for more than two centuries, revision was a more serious matter than when the process had been frequent and various versions were in simultaneous use. The majority of the revision committee consisted of members of the Anglican church, but Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Unitarians were represented in the full body of fifty-two finally selected.

The committee was divided into distinct Old and New Testament companies and, a little later, American scholars were asked to co-operate by forming an advisory board. A body of thirty was organized in this country in 1871, and began active service in 1872. Final decision in all questions rested with the British committee, but they submitted their work during its progress to the American revisers, who met once a month for ten months of the year and forwarded their suggestions to England. The English committee agreed to give special consideration to all these suggestions, to submit the work in its final form, before publication, and to embody, in an appendix, all important differences of reading and rendering finally favored by the American committee. On the other hand, the American revisers were not to issue an edition of their own for a term of fourteen years after the publication of the British Revision.

The English New Testament company held, usually, monthly sessions, of four days each, during ten months of the year. The first revision occupied six years, and the second, two and a half more; on the second revision no change from the King James translation was adopted except by a two-thirds vote. Two years more were given to consideration of the American suggestions on the second revisions and to many special questions that had arisen; it was, in fact, more than eleven years after the matter was formally acted upon in Convocation that the Revised New Testament was published, May 17, 1881. The revision of the Greek text which had seemed to Westcott a necessary preliminary to the undertaking

was carried forward by the revisers simultaneously with the translation.

As the time for publication drew near, popular interest both in England and America was tense. A million copies were ordered in advance from the Oxford Press and nearly as many from Cambridge. Probably three million copies were sold during the year. The first publication in New York was on May 20, and on May 22 the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Times* published, in their issues, the entire text of the Revised Testament. Considerably more than one-half of this was telegraphed, and the remainder was set up from copies received on the evening of the 21st. This and other publication of parts, in newspapers and periodicals, gave immediate knowledge of the contents of the new version to many.

The present writer vividly remembers the June mornings, thirty years ago, when his devout mother read, at family worship, from the little copy of the Revised Testament, comparing and sometimes commenting, while the father and son read from their accustomed copies of the Authorized Version. Similar scenes, no doubt, were a feature in many American homes in that summer of 1881. In a majority of instances, however, those tasting the new preferred the old. At times, infelicities of English in the new smote raspingly on ears tuned to the incomparable English of the King James Version. We, today, grown used to the Revised Versions, may reproduce for ourselves something of this first shock when we are so unfortunate as to hear the reading of the *Twentieth-Century New Testament* with its barbarous wording. Even recently, Dr. Rendel Harris has said of the British Revised Version: "It is almost inconceivable to me that it can ever be accepted by the English-speaking people whose language it so ruthlessly perverts." He adds, "Dr. Weymouth's New Testament in Modern Speech will, perhaps, live longer." It must be acknowledged that, with all the pains taken by the revisers to preserve the flavor of the older English by refusing to use any words not in good standing as early as 1611, they lost much of the beauty of the older versions. Perhaps a just recognition of the needs of the human soul will count this beauty hardly less significant than the thought and will recognize that its loss threatens the loss of all. We of the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries should acknowledge with bowed heads that though we may confine ourselves to a strictly Elizabethan vocabulary we cannot write Elizabethan English.

Difference in aim as well as ability in expression characterize the seventeenth-century revisers; they strove professedly for variety of diction, while the later company tried so far as possible to represent uniformly each word of the original by the same English word; the ideal of the later age was different, the prime effort was to reproduce the original as exactly as is possible in another language.

Herein, then, lie the chief excellences of the version of 1881: it translates a Greek text six or eight hundred years nearer to the original documents and it represents that text more accurately than the version of 1611 reproduces the later manuscripts on which it is based. In minor matters, we may notice that by following the earlier American Bible Union Revision in abandoning the unhappy verse division and adopting logical paragraphing, the new version provides consecutive reading, making the following of a complex Pauline argument, for example, far easier and surer. The omission of the chapter summaries is a great advantage; these are often theological interpretations rather than true summaries; they have been and are of incalculable hindrance to a right understanding of the Bible.

The work of the Old Testament company of revisers required fourteen years and it was not until May, 1885, that a complete revised Bible was given to the public. Naturally, this publication created no such furore as that of 1881. The general Christian public noted, with satisfaction, that the changes were less marked than in the New Testament, complacently inferred that its protests had chastened the revisers, and returned to its King James text ignorant of or indifferent to the fact that chiefly accounted for the difference in the revision of the two Testaments. The two hundred and seventy years between 1611 and 1870 had brought to light no early manuscripts giving a new Hebrew text for translation. Changes made here must be, mainly, those due to the effort to reproduce the original more exactly and to advance in knowledge of the Hebrew language itself. Such advance had been great, far greater than in the case of the Greek of the New

Testament, but it would not lead to any such startling changes as the omission of the Doxology from the Lord's Prayer, or of the three witnesses in I John 5:7, or the practical excision of the last twelve verses of Mark.

The most conspicuous change, aside from the abandonment of the verse division and the chapter summaries, was in the mode of printing poetry so as to indicate its division into lines. When the earlier English versions were made, the most striking characteristic of Hebrew poetical form, its parallelism, had been lost sight of, so that even in the Psalms this was not indicated to the eye. The revisers did not print all of the Old Testament poetry as such, but they did recognize a large amount of it, even in the narrative books.

The greatest advantage of the Revised Old Testament over those of earlier rendering is to be found in its far more correct and intelligible translation in such obscure books as Job and the Prophets. Any detailed and satisfactory study of these on the basis of the King James Version is impossible to one who has used the Revised Old Testament.

Viewing the Revised Version of 1881-85 as a whole, possibly the greatest gain of all secured by its publication was that anticipated by Dean Trench in 1858:

That very unsettlement in regard to the words in which God's message has hitherto been conveyed to them, might it not prove for some a motive to a more accurate considering of the message itself, a happy breaking of that crust of formality which by long habit so easily overgrows our reading of the Scripture? It would not be, I think, for most of us unprofitable to discover that the words in which the truth has been hitherto conveyed to us are exchangeable for other, in some places, it may be for better words. The shock, unpleasant as it might prove at first, might be a startling of many from a dull, lethargic, unprofitable reading of God's Word.

The British committee disbanded soon after its long and arduous labors were completed and its members made little reply to the attacks upon them and their work. Like St. Jerome, engaged in a similar work fifteen hundred years before, they had doubtless realized that any change would arouse the opposition of those who "thought that ignorance was holiness," but, unlike him, when the storm of criticism broke upon their heads, they did not call their critics "*bipedes asellos.*" Jerome's version had slowly superseded

the Old Latin and had become the Vulgate or common version before it was, in turn, revised. The revisers of the nineteenth century awaited the verdict of time. In 1897, Bishop Westcott could write:

The revisers have no reason to complain of the reception which their labors have found. It does not appear that the Authorized Version made more rapid progress in public favour in the sixteen years after its publication; and, as far as I can judge, the Revised Version is more commonly used by preachers now than the Authorized Version was after the same period of trial.

The American committee maintained its organization and continued its labors, rightly believing that it might still have important work to perform. Its condensed list of preferences, published as an appendix to the British Revision, did not adequately represent its views, so that the publication by the British presses, shortly before the expiration of the American agreement, of an "American Revised Version," in which the readings of the appendix were incorporated in the text, demanded rather than forestalled the publication of a version which should really represent the American committee. For almost thirty years, the surviving members of this committee had been giving incalculable labor to the work of revision, and the fruits of this they arranged to give to the world without any personal remuneration and through a publishing house that has made the priceless results of their work available to the public at most moderate charges.

The American Standard Bible was issued in 1901. The years that had elapsed since the appearance of the British Revision were not too long, since they made possible such real improvement. While the American Bible was also conservative, permitting no change from the Bible of 1611 except on a two-thirds vote, it made many variations from the British; in some cases, it restored King James readings; in others, it abandoned those that had been retained. Its work was, in part, national, in the substituting of words in good American standing for those differently used in England; but its chief merits were of more universal interest. It revised the punctuation and paragraphing of the British Revision. In the Old Testament, it carried out consistently such important changes as the uniform use of "Jehovah" and "sheol"; in the New

Testament, it adopted the literal marginal reading "through" instead of "by" referring to prophecy, and interpreted more intelligibly the value of ancient coins. At the top of each page it inserted brief indications of the contents of that page, of great use for rapid reference and wonderfully free from doctrinal bias. The American committee, too, dealt, with a sweeping hand, with the often misleading marginal annotations of the British Old Testament.

The publication of the American version, ten years ago, was not marked by advance sales taxing the resources of publishers. It was only when its intrinsic merits came to be known that the demand was considerable; this has steadily grown, however, the largest increase of any year being that of 1910, which exceeded the previous year by 25 per cent.

Commended by Protestant leaders of all shades of belief; adopted by the American Bible Society; by the International Sunday-School Lesson Committee; by colleges, theological seminaries, and training schools; read in multitudes of pulpits of all denominations; it seems destined to become, in fact, the "standard" Bible of all American Protestants. In England it has received generous recognition as a very real advance upon the Revised Version, though its sale there is, for the time, prevented by a copyright difficulty. To India, Africa, Australia, and other foreign missionary fields it is being shipped in large numbers.

However deeply we may regret the losses involved in the abandonment of the King James Version, it hardly seems that the efforts being made by the lovers of literature to retain the text of 1611 with its matchless beauty of diction can counterbalance the increasing desire of the church for the most accurate and intelligible reproduction of the Bible thought, when this can be found in language equal to that of the King James Version in moral dignity and religious reverence.